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## THE ESKIMOS OF NORTHERN ALASKA: A STUDY IN THE EFFECT OF CIVILIZATION

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The changes produced in the life and habits of the Eskimos of Northern Alaska during the last thirty-five years afford an interesting example of the effect European civilization may have upon an uncivilized and unprogressive people. By European I mean also American, since it was the United States and Canada, and practically they alone, which influenced and are influencing this region. That these Eskimos were incapable of developing internally to any marked degree is fairly evident from the fact that during all the centuries that have elapsed since their separation from the other branches of their race no fundamental change has taken place in either their social or their mental life. In fact, the environmental conditions to which they were subjected were unfavorable to any great development. Year by year the seasons returned unchangingly, each with its different pursuit, but all alike periods of strenuous quest for food. Spring brought the birds, the fish, and the whales; summer the trading voyages to east and south, followed by the caribou hunting and the fishing of late summer and autumn; while winter completed the circuit with its sealing through the ice. Whaling, fishing, and caribou hunting necessarily precluded much contact with neighboring peoples, while the trading in summer and the visits for dancing and festival in winter were all too brief to produce any radical change in their manner of life, even if their neighbors had been materially different. But the people who lived along the coast to the south and east were the same as themselves, while they rarely penetrated far enough into the interior in those days to come into contact with the Indians, with whom, moreover, they were usually on hostile terms. The use of fish nets and pottery, the custom of wearing labrets, and that of smoking are almost all that we can ascribe to outside influence. The great world beyond was too remote ever to reach or affect them, and their own

life involved too arduous a struggle for existence to allow them that leisure which alone enables a people to develop.

### PRESENT DEPENDENCE UPON OUTSIDE CIVILIZATION

With the advent of Europeans all this changed. The explorers of the middle of the nineteenth century remained for too brief a time and held themselves too much aloof to exert more than a temporary influence. The replacement of stone and copper utensils by iron was the main change this contact produced. The advent of the whalers about 1880 turned the scale. They mingled freely with the natives; formed temporary unions with their women; prosecuted an extensive trade with them for whalebone, caribou

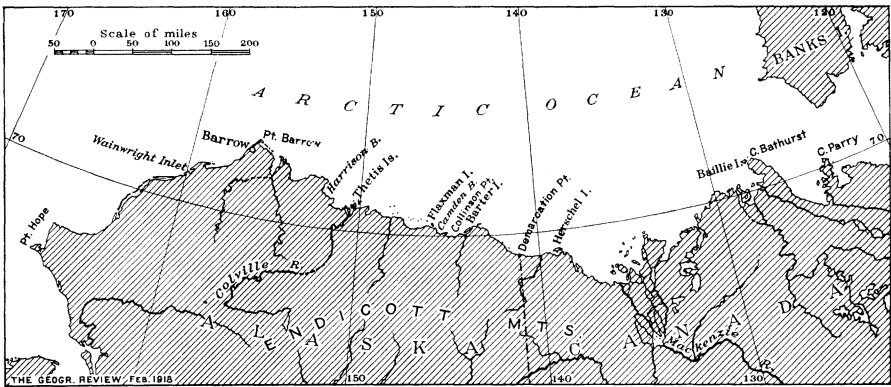


FIG. 1.—Sketch map showing the habitat of the Eskimos of Northern Alaska. Scale, 1:15,500,000.

meat, and skins; and used their services on and around the ships. Some of the seamen even deserted their ships and adopted the life and habits of the Eskimos. Firearms were introduced, and European food, notably flour, sugar, and tea, became first a luxury, then a necessity. The years from 1880 to 1890 saw the zenith of the whaling industry, when whalebone brought its highest price in European and American markets. With its decline a demand for polar bear and fox skins arose, and the attention of the natives was directed to the more permanent and profitable pursuit of trapping. This pursuit has endured to the present day and seems likely to continue indefinitely.

Firearms quickly produced a revolution in the economic situation. The caribou, never very numerous west of the Colville River, were exterminated or driven east. But few now find shelter in the winding valleys and lakes of the Colville basin and in the Endicott Mountains which separate it from the basin of the Mackenzie. Mountain sheep have always had a rather limited range and are now becoming rare even in their principal habitat, the Endicotts. Consequently, the fur necessary for winter clothing had to be brought in from outside, and the Eskimos west of the Colville ceased to be

self-supporting. At the same time a great impetus was given to the hunting of ducks, geese, and loons, and to the shooting of seals, as they basked on top of the ice in the warm days of spring or protruded their heads out of the water in summer and autumn. Winter sealing, with all its attendant exposure and hardships, gradually fell into decay, and the season was devoted to trapping foxes. European food, purchased in summer with fox skins, a few birds, and frozen fish stored away in the autumn have now practically superseded seal meat for the winter diet; while the whales killed in the spring supply not only much of the blubber but also the "black skin," or *maktak*, which has always been regarded as a delicacy. The blubber lamp has given place to the lantern and kerosene for light and to the iron stove and "Primus" lamp for cooking, though at Barrow, where the wood supply has been exhausted, whale blubber is burnt for fuel in iron stoves. At least half of the food consumed by the Eskimos of Northern Alaska now comes from European sources.

The winter house, on the other hand, though slightly modified by the introduction of iron stoves, has changed but little from its original form. From the first thaw in May, however, till the freeze-up again in September it is uninhabitable, for the melting of the winter coat of snow floods the interior with water. Formerly the Eskimos moved in spring into tents of caribou skin, which they carried in their umiaks along the coast and up the rivers, and packed on their backs overland during the caribou hunting of summer. Now they everywhere use tents of cloth, which are both cheaper to make or buy and lighter to carry. Some, indeed, at the beginning of winter surround their tents with snow walls instead of building or reoccupying their huts of wood. At Barrow a few cottages have been built on a European model, with board floors raised slightly above the level of the ground. They too are lined with snow walls in winter, which are removed at the first sign of warm weather in spring, and are thus habitable the whole year round.

#### REINDEER

Life's three great necessities, therefore, food, shelter, and clothing, the Eskimo is no longer able to provide for himself. Remove the supply from without and he will perish within a few years. The United States government has indeed attempted to restore their independence by introducing herds of Lapland reindeer at Barrow, Point Hope, and other places farther south; but the project can hardly be considered to have passed much beyond the experimental stage, at least in the north. The Eskimo there has always been a hunter and finds it very difficult to accommodate himself to the pastoral life of the Lapp, however profitable it may be. Whether the breeding and tending of the reindeer will ever become popular and universal among them still remains doubtful, though amongst the natives farther south it has already become one of the most important economic factors in



FIG. 2—Camp of inland Eskimos (Nunatagmiut) at Collinson Point, May, 1915.

their life. But reindeer have not been established east of Barrow, and perhaps never will be. Nothing in that region indicates that the life of trapping and hunting will ever be changed.

#### CHANGES IN MATERIAL CULTURE

It follows as a natural result that their material culture in all its details has undergone great change. The old weapons of the chase are fast disappearing. Stone immediately gave place to iron, the bow and arrow soon vanished, and the harpoons and spears used for sealing and whaling are fast following in their wake. The three-pronged bird spear with its thrower (the musk-rat spear of the Mackenzie, the fish-spear of the Copper Eskimos) and the bird bolas are now very rare. Even kayaks are far less common than formerly, and the skin umiak is being supplanted by the whaleboat. The sled introduced by the whites replaced at once the old type with mud runners, and the harness, though still widely used in its old form, is generally made of leather or canvas instead of deerskin, while the trace is invariably of rope; as for the dogs they are now driven single file or in pairs, not abreast. European tools, axes, saws, knives, files, scissors, etc., are found in every household. Of their old implements only five are in everyday use, the snow shovel, the bow drill, the curved whittling knife, the woman's knife, and the skin scrapers, all of which, save perhaps the bow drill, are more adapted to the purposes to which they are applied than any implement which we can supply. It is interesting to note that while the implement used for stretching and softening skins is generally an iron ferrule set on a short wooden handle, the actual scraper, which is set on a similar handle, is still commonly made of flint. The scraper, its flaker of copper, and the snow shovel—these alone have preserved the original type unchanged. Many natives possess sewing machines, for calico overclothes are held to be as necessary as fur underclothes. Woolen hose, woolen shirts and vests, even felt and leather boots are daily growing in use. The old-fashioned frock coat has been superseded by a plainly cut style which shows no variation from Nome to the Mackenzie. Labrets are worn by but one or two old men, and the curious willow-stem pipes, modeled perhaps on an Asiatic pattern, cannot withstand the invasion of the briar and the cherry. Very little in the outward culture now differentiates the Eskimo from the white.

#### CHANGES IN POPULATION

Equally great has been the change in the density and distribution of the population. The coast from Barrow to Demarcation Point was once the home of a thriving people, as is attested by the numerous ruins of settlements on the Thetis Islands, at Collinson Point, Barter Island, and elsewhere. But almost all these Eskimos, for some reason which is not at present known, had disappeared before the arrival of the whites. Dease and

Simpson, when they voyaged along the coast in 1837, and Collinson, when he wintered in Camden Bay in 1852, saw but few remnants of them. Barrow and Point Barrow alone seem at first sight to have kept up to their ancient level; but they too have declined, for, as Stefansson has already pointed out, but few of the existing inhabitants are descendants of the former population; the great majority are immigrants from elsewhere, from the interior and from the coast settlements to the south. Diseases, especially measles, tuberculosis, and venereal diseases, followed in the train of the whalers; fostered by a lax morality and by a total ignorance of the laws of hygiene, they swept through the helpless population like a devastating plague. Today their ravages are less apparent—the first invasion of a new disease is always the most fatal—but they have left their traces everywhere. The last two diseases are still common, and the descendants of the old coast population, who were naturally the most affected, seem to have lost some of their virility; at all events it is noticeable that almost all the whaleboats at Barrow and Point Barrow, together with the scows at the mouth of the Mackenzie, are owned by natives from inland. They migrated from their homes, the Eskimos of the Colville and westward going for the most part to Barrow and Point Barrow, those eastward of that river to the Mackenzie. In the winter of 1913-14 only one family was said to be living in the Colville basin, and not more than three or four pass the summer there. Yet thirty years ago a considerable population fished up and down its rivers and speared and netted caribou on its hills and lakes. Natives from Barrow and Point Barrow spread eastward in winter as far as Harrison Bay for the purpose of trapping foxes; in spring and summer this part of the coast is deserted. Between that point and Flaxman Island there are no inhabitants. In 1913 and 1914 six families resided, winter and summer, between Flaxman Island and the boundary, but all of these were newcomers—two from the Colville, one from Point Hope, and one from Port Clarence. Some dozen families belonging to the old inland people still winter on the south slopes of the Endicott Mountains within the tree line, trapping and caribou hunting. In spring, during the bird and sealing season, they come down to the coast and trade with their fellow-countrymen and with an occasional white man; in autumn they retire over the mountains again. This is all that remains of a once dense population, dense, that is, for a people that gained its living by the chase.

#### SOCIAL AND FAMILY LIFE

Generally, but not always, the social organization of a hunting people is very simple, and the Eskimos were no exception. They lived in groups of families which clustered together in winter at the sealing and whaling grounds and scattered inland in summer for the caribou hunting. The families were connected by ties of kinship and relationship, and the communion and intercourse between them was consequently closer than in the

more heterogeneous villages of the civilized world. There was no division into rich and poor, for the products of the chase were shared by all. Some were naturally better hunters, more skilled in magic, or possessed more force of character, and so enjoyed greater influence than their fellows; but in theory all were equal. Characteristic of the winter life was the dance house, where the people diverted themselves and entertained their visitors. At odd times it formed a sort of clubhouse and common workshop for the men and a playroom for the children. Barrow annually exchanged visits for trade and dancing with Wainwright Inlet. The migratory life of summer naturally excluded the dance house. At that season they wandered over the land in small bands, each comprising three or four families who combined for caribou drives very similar to those which still take place among the Copper Eskimos to the east. Organized war was unknown; whatever hostility took place was sporadic and unpremeditated. Within the community the great guardian of the social rules and customs was public opinion. Murder provoked the blood feud, and a flagrant wrongdoer might be suddenly attacked and killed by his neighbors with the approval of the community at large.

The home life seems to have been peaceable and well-conducted. The aged were treated with respect, the young with indulgence. It is doubtful whether these Eskimos ever regularly deserted the old and infirm when their strength gave way; present-day natives deny the charge. Nor has infanticide been proved against them, though the practice of isolating mother and babe for months, often provided with the poorest shelter against the winter cold, must have caused great mortality. Adoption was frequent, the adopted child receiving the status and treatment of the real. Chastisement of children was rare, though it did occur, and harsh conduct brought condemnation and ill will from kinsmen and neighbors. The Eskimo carried into his home the patience and endurance instilled into him by his whole manner of life, by the weary watching over the seal hole in winter, the tedious fishing of spring, and the waiting behind cover during the caribou drives of summer.

The change in the economic environment has naturally reacted upon all this. In winter the families scatter by twos and threes for trapping. Frequently two families, generally but not necessarily connected by kinship, occupy a single hut. Sometimes they divide it by a partition wall, leaving a blank space at one end of it to serve as a passage between the two rooms. The dance house has vanished; such dances as occur at Barrow and Point Barrow, the only places where there are any great assemblages of people, are held in ordinary private houses. In spring the families reassemble for sealing and whaling, but they are more or less unsettled throughout the summer and autumn. The influx of natives from other places has relaxed the old intimate relations that prevailed amongst them, though open house is still kept everywhere and friends and strangers alike are hospitably enter-





FIG. 3.



FIG. 4.

FIG. 3—Man in kayak drawing fish out of a net. Canadian Arctic Expedition's schooners *Alaska* and *North Star* in the offing. Shingle Point, Mackenzie River delta, August, 1914.

FIG. 4—Aiyakak digging in the ruin of an Eskimo house. Western sandspit of Barter Island, July, 1914.



FIG. 5.



FIG. 6.

FIG. 5—Inland Eskimos reaching Collinson Point in May, 1914, after spending the winter trapping south of the Endicott Mountains, Northern Alaska.

FIG. 6—Fox skins drying. Humphrey Point, Northern Alaska, May, 1914.

tained. Trade is producing a growing differentiation in the matter of wealth, but there is no distinction of class and no real poverty, for the needy are supported by their more prosperous neighbors. The administration of justice has passed into the hands of the United States government, and in consequence the blood feud has disappeared. So, too, have other old customs, sorcery and magic of every kind (at least on the surface), and the isolation of women in childbirth. Sexual morality has greatly improved, partly from a growing knowledge of the evils to which loose living gave rise, partly as a result of missionary teaching. Much progress must still be made, however, before the standard of civilization is attained.

#### READJUSTMENT OF THE SOCIAL SYSTEM

Stefansson recommended, on the ground of humanity, that the Copper Eskimos should be allowed to live their life undisturbed by any intrusion from outside. This is no longer possible, since the world has learned of their existence, apart from the fact that they themselves are now beginning to make annual visits to Great Bear Lake, where they meet with both Indians and whites. Nor does it seem justified by what has happened in Northern Alaska.

Speaking generally, when a savage or uncivilized race is first brought into contact with civilization, two results usually occur. First the old social system breaks down, carrying with it the morality that it supported. This opens the road to self-indulgence and excess of every kind, followed by disease and misery, which, partly directly, partly indirectly, by undermining the virility of the race, cause its decline and sometimes its extinction. This is what occurred, for example, in Tahiti, and amongst some of the American Indians. Sometimes, under counteracting influences, the people recover, as in Samoa, and such recovery seems to be going on in Northern Alaska. There the very simplicity of the social organization and its adaptability to new conditions prevented its destruction; it altered without entirely breaking down. It still lends its support to the respect with which property and persons are regarded and binds the people together in harmony and good-will. Injustice and theft, spite and malice occur the world over but are not more common in Northern Alaska than elsewhere; probably they are less common, since the hardships and vicissitudes of Arctic life render it necessary for every man to be ready and willing at all times to help his neighbor; another day he may himself stand in need of assistance. The one virtue which the Eskimo of Northern Alaska lacks is cleanliness. Yet even in this he has made a great stride forward, as may be realized when one compares him with the Copper Eskimos. It must not be forgotten that for eight months in the year every drop of water that he uses, whether for drinking, cooking, or washing, he obtains only by melting snow or ice within the house, in a small pot upon a tiny, often homemade, stove; and further that the fur clothing he wears, the only kind of clothing that is

adapted to the rigorous climate, must be kept dry at any cost and so cannot be maintained spotlessly clean like the woolen and cotton garments of civilization. He may be forgiven, then, if he fails to attain our standard of personal cleanliness. Undoubtedly he will continue to improve in this respect as time goes on; at present it is ignorance rather than carelessness that keeps him back. We cannot attribute to bad hygiene alone the spread of disease and consequent heavy mortality of the past. Even under the best conditions a new disease will travel far and wide. Moreover, there are strong grounds for believing that these Eskimos were declining in number



FIG. 7.—Tents of two Eskimo families (Aiyakak's and Teriglu's) near Barter Island, May, 1914.

even before the whites appeared; it is difficult otherwise to account for the extent and number of the ruined settlements that dot the coast line. The same slow process of decline seems to be going on today among the Copper Eskimos, though the cause remains obscure.

#### MISSIONARY INFLUENCE

Missionary teaching, however imperfectly understood, and however misinterpreted, has been on the whole beneficial to the Eskimos. A native no more than the average white man can reason out a set of moral rules to guide his conduct. He depends on custom to tell him what to do and what not to do, and custom unfortunately prescribes or allows many undesirable practices. I once remonstrated with some Copper Eskimos about the wanton killing of caribou when not absolutely required for food or clothing. They merely replied, "Oh, but that is our custom," and considered the matter ended there. So, too, in Northern Alaska, custom prescribed all kinds of magical ceremonies in connection with hunting, sometimes accompanied by the grossest immorality. When the old customs were thrown overboard with the coming of the whites, missionary teaching stepped in and with its peremptory commands of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" upheld the better elements in their moral code, while unconditionally condemning the bad. The Eskimos grasped immediately at the externals of the religion offered him, the praying and the singing that so much resembled his old incanta-

tions, and the resting on Sunday. It would be hard to find a family in the whole length and breadth of Northern Alaska that is altogether indifferent to these things. Yet it is wrong to affirm therefore that the total result of missionary teaching has been simply to introduce new ceremonies, new incantations, and new taboos in place of the old. Such a view overlooks the strong influence exerted toward a higher morality and a more intellectual life. Man's thoughts and actions are not revolutionized in a day; the wise teacher looks to the future for his results, to the generations that come after him. So if the Christianity of the Eskimo today is very crude and full of superstition, it is nevertheless free from many of the injurious practices of his old religion and contains in itself the germs of a higher development.

#### TRAPPING AS AN ECONOMIC READJUSTMENT

The second result of contact with civilization is the change it produces in economic conditions. The native, unable to adapt himself to the altered circumstances and take up a new mode of life, loses all his energy and pines away in idleness and melancholy. To this more than to any other cause must be attributed the total extinction of so many uncivilized peoples during the last four centuries. Protective legislation and the fostering care of a paternal government can delay but not arrest its action. There is but one remedy, to find some new field of enterprise that will be congenial to the natives and absorb all their energies. Such to the Eskimos is trapping. It requires almost the same exertions out of doors in the winter twilight as did sealing through the ice in former days, while their old love of the chase still finds its outlet in the caribou and mountain-sheep hunting in the Colville valley and the Endicott Mountains, in the whaling round Barrow, and in the shooting of birds and seals all along the coast. Conditions have changed, but not so much as to make the Eskimos lose their grasp of things, and the new mode of life, if it involves less hardship than the old, is not so easy as to sap their energies and destroy their virility.

#### EDUCATION

Education is slowly spreading among the younger generation. English is taught in the school at Barrow and by the missionaries in the Mackenzie Delta, while the natives pick up a little from the traders. Only two or three indeed could write even the shortest letter in English; but notes in their own language, in the simple script of the missionaries, are freely current all along the coast. The Eskimo may have been a savage in many of his customs, but in intelligence he ranks far above the average. The Northern Alaskan natives did not adorn their implements with representations of the chase to the same extent as their kinsmen in Greenland, yet they possess no mean artistic skill. Young and old alike can make presentable drawings of men and animals, of hunting scenes, and of domestic life. A Colville River Eskimo who had never handled a pencil before made a very tolerable sketch of the Colville River and its tributaries. They have always been skilful in

the use of tools and in consequence make admirable craftsmen. Many take their watches to pieces and put them together again. Talents such as these are likely to be especially useful in a people on the very outskirts of civilization.

#### FUTURE PROSPECTS

The exact number of the half-caste population is uncertain. Undoubtedly it is very small as yet, but it will probably increase as time goes on, for



FIG. 8—The Klengenberg family, Baillie Island. The father was of Danish extraction, the mother an Eskimo woman from Cape Prince of Wales.

the Eskimos have no objection to intermarriage. The mixed race must of necessity follow the same manner of life as the natives. At the same time it should prove a strong factor in the progress and development of the country from the greater interest it is likely to have in the outside world. Even now some of the Eskimos are beginning to trade directly with the United States, sending their furs through the post office at Barrow. There is every reason, then, to believe that these Northern Alaskan natives will escape the fate of so many uncivilized peoples of the present day; they will survive, like their brethren in Greenland, as a factor of no large importance, yet not altogether unproductive, in the world's life. Civilization, if it brought ruin and destruction at its first invasion, remains to build, and the new edifice promises to be fairer and worthier than the old.